Innovation Schools:

What can Washington learn from other states?

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Executive Summary

The 2011 Washington State Legislature passed two bills that promote innovative public schools. The legislature sought to 1) formally recognize existing successful innovative schools and 2) create a mechanism to increase the number of innovative schools. An underlying premise of the two bills is that innovative methods can be beneficial for schools and communities struggling to improve student academic outcomes. This report reviews the available literature on innovation school initiatives at both the school and district level with the purpose of providing a theoretical framework for Washington as it navigates this new legislation.

Many cases of school improvement observe some level of innovation that educators implement to address student needs. It would seem that innovation through adapting multiple school policies and practices to address student needs is a required element for school improvement. This is true because:

- Students' needs differ from one another; the same approach won't necessarily be successful for all students
- Communities grow and change and schools must respond to how the community changes affect the school environment
- Teachers vary in their professional development needs

Overall, this report found that innovation schools could be a promising option for improving student outcomes. Innovation schools often lead to improved school environments for both staff and students; require teachers and school leaders to carefully assess the most effective strategies for improving student learning; and ultimately put student needs at the center of the conversation. All of the innovation schools in the research demonstrate that they are not operating in isolation. They are still held accountable to state and district regulations and must interact with the central office on a regular basis. The literature suggests that districts can play a critical role in helping improve school-wide reforms because they can mobilize limited resources and give legitimacy to reform efforts, but it requires a significant amount of innovation and organizational restructuring for districts to adequately support such reforms (Dillon, 2011; Glazer, 2009; Honig, 2006; Honig et al., 2010; Honig & Rainey, 2011; Honig, 2012; Rorrer et al., 2008).

Washington schools and districts have the advantage to learn from other states with innovation schools. While the findings suggest that innovation schools are a promising strategy to improve student outcomes, this report does not assert that innovation schools should be the only strategy to improve student academic achievement. In order to successfully implement an

innovation school, they require a considerable amount of capacity and foresight. Common themes in successful innovation schools in these other states include:

- Coherent innovation plan that accounts for other district and state policies
- Innovation plans that focus on instructional improvement and student learning
- Involvement of school staff and community members during innovation plan development and implementation
- Support from central offices for innovation schools while implementing reform(s)
- Capacity – both within schools and districts – to support school changes
- Continuous assessment of how plan is contributing to student achievement
- Engaging in evidence-based practices
- Long-term succession plans

Washington's Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) set forth requirements for innovation schools, some of which are promising requirements because they helped other innovation schools achieve initial success. For example, OSPI requires schools to submit an innovation plan that clearly identifies evidence-based practices that will improve student learning. This requirement is a promising element because the findings suggest that innovation schools are more likely to see long lasting changes if the school initiates the innovation. Another promising policy in Washington is OSPI's requirement for schools to demonstrate strong community partnerships and support from school staff in their application in order to be considered. Partnering with community organizations helped other innovation schools achieve initial success as it helped build capacity within the school. It is important to note that schools were not as successful, even when they partnered with outside organizations, if the school's plan conflicted with existing policies. Therefore, it is important for everyone involved in the innovation plan to be aware of all relevant policies and aim to align innovation plans with those existing policies.

Washington schools should be aware of challenges other innovation schools face. The literature suggests that innovation schools struggle with implementation challenges, districts struggle with supporting differentiated schools within one system, and accountability demands in high-stakes environments hinder long-lasting changes.

Moving forward, innovation school evaluators should ask the following questions:

1) Do schools appear to have the appropriate capacity to fully implement their plans?
2) To what degree do schools feel like their districts support them?
3) To what degree are districts actively supporting innovation schools?
4) Are schools demonstrating evidence-based practices and continuous assessments?

Introduction

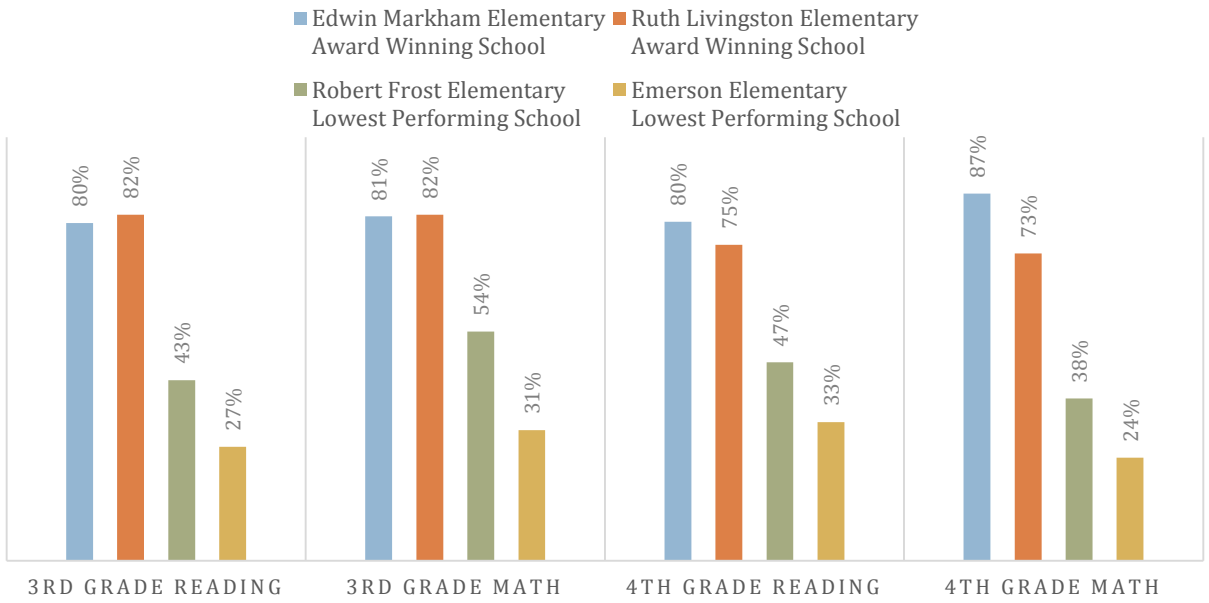
One of the quintessential questions in public education is why does one school perform better than another school? Educators might respond by saying that the students are different; some students will do better than others due to variables the school cannot control. They have different backgrounds, family situations, and socio-economic statuses that result in students bringing different skillsets to the classroom. Another perspective might say that one school has better teachers, a better principal, and or more parent and community involvement. Research suggests that a number of factors influence overall school performance including all of the aforementioned variables as well as district leadership and school funding levels (Hanushek, 1997; Corcoran et al., 2001; Leithwood, 2003; Marks & Printy, 2003; Waters & Marzano, 2006; Stewart, 2008).

Similar to other states, Washington K-12 public schools perform at varying levels. In 2012, the State awarded 382 schools achievement awards for overall excellence and/or high achievement in specialized areas. Simultaneously, the state released the names of the lowest performing 50 schools in the state, which also appear on the federal "persistently lowest-achieving schools" list.[1] Discrepancies in student achievement between these high achieving schools and low performing schools are significant. These discrepancies also exist in similar geographic areas. For example, Pasco School District, which enrolls just over 15,000 students, has two award winning schools for excellence in closing the achievement gap.[2] This district also has seven of its schools on the lowest performing list. The differences in student academic performance between these schools are evident in Figure 1. For example, Edwin Markham Elementary School and Ruth Livingston Elementary School, both award winning schools, have third grade reading scores at 80% or above meaning that 80% or above of third grade students are meeting the state standard for third grade reading. Emerson Elementary School, on the other hand, only has 27% of its third graders meeting the state standard for third grade reading, and Robert Frost Elementary School only has 46% of its third graders meeting state standards.

[1] There are total of 2,281 public K-12 schools in Washington as of 2012 (Senate Ways and Means Committee, 2012). More information about Washington Achievement Awards can be found at http://www.k12.wa.us/EducationAwards/WashingtonAchievement/. More information about the lowest achieving schools can be found at http://www.k12.wa.us/Communications/PressReleases2011/Persistently_Lowest_Achieving_Schools_List.pdf.

[2] The achievement gap is frequently referred to in education research and literature and represents the difference in academic achievement between students.

FIGURE 1. Comparing Pasco School District's (WA) Award-winning and Low-performing Schools



Achievement differences across schools often reflect differences in student demographics. Even within similar geographic areas, schools still possess many differences. For example, the Emerson Elementary student population is 91.5% Hispanic and 94.9% qualify for reduced or free lunch. Ruth Livingston Elementary students, on the other hand, are 56.7% white, 31% Hispanic and 42.5% qualify for free or reduced lunch.[3] Educators have coined the differences in achievement the "achievement gap" and the differences tend to be greater between different ethnicities and socio-economic statuses with minority and low-income students often performing lower than their peers (Haycock, 2001; Lee, 2002; Rothstein, 2004). Therefore, each school faces different challenges and must respond accordingly to their students' needs.

Washington Encourages Innovation in Schools

The 2011 Washington State Legislature passed two bills that promote innovative public schools hoping to achieve two goals: 1) formally recognize existing successful innovative schools and 2) create a way to increase the number of innovative schools. The two bills suggest that

[3] For more information on Washington school performance, see http://reportcard.ospi.k12.wa.us.

innovative methods can be beneficial for schools and communities struggling to improve student academic outcomes (see Exhibit A for details on both bills).

The first bill, House Bill (HB) 1521, seeks to recognize existing successful innovation schools. It does not provide an explicit definition for innovation, but rather gives various examples of schools implementing unique programs. For example, the bill mentions Talbot Hill Elementary School's (Renton School District) micro-society program, where students form "communities" that include services in government, banking, newspapers, post office, and courts. Another example includes the Lincoln High School (Tacoma School District) Lincoln center program that uses an extended day program to improve academic outcomes for low-performing students. These examples suggest that HB 1521 might view innovation schools as schools that are employing creative and unique programs that are not found in other nearby schools and engage students in programs that better fit their learning styles.

While the above examples provide some insight into what HB 1521 had in mind for what innovation schools are, OSPI, in accordance with HB 1521, developed a set of criteria to systematically identify innovation schools that are successfully implementing innovation(s) on a school-wide level. The criteria are explained in more detail in Exhibit 1, but some of the criteria include: 1) the school is implementing innovative ideas in multiple areas, 2) educational options are catered to student learning styles, and 3) the school takes action to serve as a learning opportunity for other schools. Applying these criteria, OSPI designated twenty-two schools as innovation schools.

The 2011 legislature goes a step further, seeking to increase the number of innovation schools and encourage schools – especially those servicing low-performing students – to develop innovation plans as indicated by HB 1546. In accordance, OSPI developed the criteria to designate new innovation schools, which also stresses innovations around the arts, sciences, technology, engineering, and mathematics (A-STEM) fields as well as strong partnerships between the school and the community. In addition, HB 1546 allows innovation zones to be designated if a group of schools share similar goals and are in the same geographic area. To date, the OSPI has designated a total of eleven new schools and one zone as new innovation schools/zone. [4]

[4] For more information on designated innovation schools and zones, please see http://www.k12.wa.us/InnovativeSchools/pubdocs/NewInnovativeList.pdf .

Exhibit A. Summary of Innovation School Legislative Bills 1521 and 1546

House Bill 1521

House Bill (HB) 1521 required the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) to:

1) Develop criteria and a streamlined review process for identifying innovative schools,
2) Develop a logo, certificate, and other recognition strategies, and
3) Create a page on the OSPI website that highlights the innovative schools, provides links to the school websites, and links to national research and best practices.

In accordance with HB 1521, OSPI developed a robust set of criteria that assess whether a school is successfully implementing innovation(s) on a school-wide level. OSPI designated twenty-two schools as innovation schools after receiving forty-two applications. To be designated as an innovation school, the school had to demonstrate the following:

- It is implementing "bold, creative, and innovative educational ideas," in at least four to seven areas,
- It holds students and teachers to high expectations and standards,
- It provides students with educational options catered to their learning styles,
- It has meaningful parent and community partnerships,
- It continuously takes action to serve as a learning opportunity for innovation implementation for other schools, and
- It has proven successful in achieving outcomes for their students.

House Bill 1546

The 2011 legislature also wanted to go beyond just recognizing existing successful innovative schools and encourage schools – especially those servicing low-performing students – to develop innovation plans as indicated by HB 1546. HB 1546 focuses on increasing the number of innovative schools and directs the OSPI to:

1) Develop a process for school districts to have schools be designated as innovation Schools, and
2) Develop criteria for reviewing applications and evaluating the needs for waivers.

In accordance with HB 1546, the OSPI set forth an application process that required schools to identify the following:

- Activities and innovation plan(s) to be implemented
- Expected student achievement improvement
- Budget and sources of funding
- Technical resources needed and who will provide them
- Accountability and evaluation measures
- Justifications for any requested waivers from state statutes
- An agreement between school leaders and local bargaining units that demonstrate a willingness to provide waivers if needed
- Proof that a majority of the school staff approve the plan

OSPI also stresses innovations around the arts, sciences, technology, engineering, and mathematics (A-STEM) fields as well as strong partnerships between the school and the community. HB 1546 also allows innovation zones to be designated if a group of schools share similar goals and are in the same geographic area. The designation process first includes approval from the local educational service districts (ESD) and then final approval from the OSPI.

Defining Innovation

The Legislature's innovation bills encourage schools and districts to implement different approaches that can help improve student outcomes. They encourage school leaders to be innovative and imply that innovation can help turn around struggling schools. This legislation suggests that chronically struggling schools will not see improvements if they continue using the same strategies. Instead, the legislation wants to encourage school leaders to develop improvement plans that go beyond the traditional methods. The bills, however, never succinctly define what innovation in schools mean. Many schools might argue that they are innovative if it only means trying new ideas in the classroom. However, the innovation bills' aim to recognize and encourage schools engaging in unique methodologies throughout the school that improve student outcomes that other schools have not tried. Innovation schools, in a sense, should act as "educational laboratories" to identify new ways to help improve student academic achievement.

Damanpour (1991) examined organizational innovation and found that successful organizations adopt multiple innovations over time. He stated, "Innovation is a means of changing an organization, whether as a response to changes in its internal or external environment or as a preemptive action taken to influence an environment." (p. 556) He further defined innovation as the "adoption of an internally generated or purchased … policy … that is new to the adopting organization." (p. 556) Unless the organization responds adequately to "environmental changes" then the organization will not sustain success. In the context of schools, this would mean that innovation schools are adopting multiple innovations, or new practices, to respond to changes in student needs to improve student outcomes. OSPI also recognizes the importance of multiple innovations in schools as they stress successful innovations on a "school-wide" level. Schools must demonstrate how their innovations are or will positively influence student academic achievement while maintaining strong support from staff, parents, and the surrounding community. Combining Damanpour's (1991) research with the bills language along with the OSPI's streamlined criteria for innovation schools, this paper will use the following definition for innovation schools:

> *Innovation schools respond to changes in student needs through continuously employing multiple innovations, or new academic and social approaches, that engage school staff, parents, and the local community while upholding high expectations for students and teachers.*[5]

[5] This report recognizes that other researchers or educators might use slightly different definitions for innovation school to include broader or narrower nuances.

Research Purpose

While HB 1521 states that "Washington has a long history of providing legal, financial, and political support for a wide range of innovative programs … in public schools," Washington is still in its infancy compared to other states when it comes to innovative school legislation. Innovation schools have been prevalent in other states for many years.[6] Washington can benefit from research on innovation schools in other states and policy makers can apply the "lessons learned" to understand the necessary structural components required for innovation schools to flourish. In addition, research from other states can help Washington educators identify implementation challenges they are likely to encounter and strategies to overcome those challenges. To synthesize this research, this report will focus on two primary research questions:

1) Under what circumstances can schools and districts successfully implement innovations that lead to school improvements?

2) What strategies can districts and schools use to sustain school improvement?

Background

Because taxpayers finance public schools, the general public exerts tremendous pressure on educators and policymakers to implement effective school programs to ensure students are succeeding. This pressure often results in various education reforms and fads contributing to a continuously changing educational landscape. Researchers, educators, and policymakers are continuously searching for the best strategies to improve student achievement. The following paragraphs will explore how researchers, educators, and policymakers have approached school improvement over the last few decades, how the concept of innovation has evolved throughout this process, and the ongoing interactions between schools and central offices.

Evolution of School Improvement Approaches

For decades, educators and researchers have focused on a variety of areas regarding school improvement from common themes of highly successful schools to implementation strategies that schools can use to introduce or enhance the aforementioned common themes (Rosenholtz, 1985; Gray, 1996; Joyce & Hopkins, 1999; Reynolds & Teddlie, 2000; Muijis et al.,

[6] Innovation schools are often referred to under different names such as pilot schools, performance schools, autonomous schools, etc.

2004). Policymakers and education leaders consider research that focuses on common themes of highly successful school to be important because it can be a learning tool for schools. Through this kind of research, educators can identify best practices for schools and assess the degree to which their school practices match up to the identified best practices. For example, research has shown that having a high level of family and community involvement in the school can help create a better learning environment for students (Epstein, 1994; Sheldon, 2003; Furlong et al., 2003). A school leader dedicated to improving their school will look to this research, assesses their school environment, and ask whether they can check off a high level of family and community involvement. If they cannot check it off, then they know they should take steps to improve that area. That's where research on implementation strategies becomes helpful.

Many years of research have produced countless reports that identify school improvement approaches (Dembo & Gibson, 1985; Fullan, 1992; Sergiovanni, 1992; Hargreaves, 1995; Smylie et al., 2002; Harris et al., 2013). The way in which this research is used to implement school improvement reforms, both at the micro and macro level, fluctuates depending on the political landscape, available resources, and public opinion. For example, the federal government took on a much greater roll in actively implementing school improvement education reforms in the 1980s after the *Nation at Risk* (1983) report was released and again in the early 2000s when the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) was passed. According to Rorrer et al. (2008), there were three distinct waves of reform. The first wave, from 1983-1986, of reform "sought to mainly expand or improve educational inputs (i.e. longer school days, increased requirements for graduation, better teachers) and ensure competency in basic skills (i.e. graduation tests, lock-step curricula, promotional criteria)." (p. 309) These reforms were often directed from top-down initiatives. This means that schools had limited input on what they needed to do to improve student outcomes, but were mandated by either districts or state policies to implement necessary changes.

After a few years, policy makers realized they were not seeing their desired results in student performance, and thus states and local districts made efforts to allow schools to decide what approach is best based on their student needs. For example, the second wave of reform – during the late 1980s – emphasized "decentralization, professionalization, and bottom-up key concepts, as reformers focus[ed] on the change process and on active involvement of those closest to instruction" (Rorrer et al., 2008, p 309). The shift from top-down to bottom-up decision-making was motivated by the theory that those working closest with the students know what students need better than policy makers far removed from the classroom. This process of decentralization was experimental for many districts and, once again, schools did not observe immediate improved results in student performance.

The third wave of reform, throughout the 1990s, evolved out of a combination of the first two waves to create a "coherent systemic strategy … one which can set the conditions for change to take place not just in a small handful of schools for a few children, but in the great majority." (Rorrer et al., 2008, p. 309) Changing the strategy to focus on the "great majority" implied that districts and central offices must also play a role in school improvement if the districts wanted to see *all* schools improve.[7] Central offices generally have resources, such as expertise in school finance, human resources, and professional development that schools do not have the time and or capacity to develop. If central offices use these resources effectively, then they could focus on the "great majority" and help all schools improve. In addition, central offices have access to all of the schools in the district and theoretically have the ability to identify what is working in one school, what is not working in another, and develop a systematic way to assist struggling schools using the information they know about successful schools.

The history of American public education suggests that school improvement approaches evolve in a cyclical fashion. Tyack and Cuban wrote, "Reformers … have alternately proposed student-centered pedagogy or teacher-centered instruction, attention to academic or to practical knowledge, and centralized or decentralized governance of schools." (p 41) The cycle of centralized and decentralized governance of schools is particularly interesting for school improvement strategies. With centralized governance, districts and states primarily make most of the decisions for schools from curriculum to day-to-day operations regarding staff and hours. Schools must comply with this top-down approach and are held accountable if they don't comply. With decentralized governance, the focus shifts from district or state-level top-down decisions for schools to school-level bottom-up decisions for schools. School leaders decide what is best for their teachers and students. Schools are still held accountable to the state and must demonstrate student achievement, but the level of compliance required is much less compared to the centralized governance structure. The following paragraphs will discuss how innovation schools fall under the decentralized governance structure and how autonomy can impact these schools.

Innovation Schools and Autonomy

Across the country, many districts have created formal mechanisms for innovation schools so that those schools can act as "educational laboratories" to test new programs and approaches. If they are successful in achieving improved student achievement, then other schools can potentially use similar models to improve student outcomes. Innovation school

[7] Education literature often uses district and central office interchangeably. This report will also do the same.

leaders could argue that some level of autonomy is required before schools can truly act as laboratories for other schools because state statutes and laws can be burdensome and inhibit innovation (Adamowski et al., 2007). If the statutes and laws are prohibitive and do not allow any flexibility for schools to try new methods, then schools are essentially forced to comply with whatever policies the centralized governance decides to implement. Allowing schools certain autonomies opens the doors for schools to be more innovative. In many cases, innovation schools benefit from some level of operational autonomy (Honig & Rainey, 2011; Adamowski et al., 2007). However, the level of autonomy often varies (Honig & Rainey, 2011) which brings to questions, to what level can these schools act as "educational laboratories" if they do not have the autonomy they need to innovate?

Full school autonomy is most often correlated with charter schools. Charter schools are public schools that operate outside of the traditional district administrative purview and are often granted freedom from state statues to implement innovative approaches. In many states, charter schools often act as the "educational laboratories" for schools and districts because they are given a much greater level of autonomy. Charter schools often exercise their autonomy through budget allocations, student learning time, teacher-student ratios, curriculum, and extracurricular activities (Wohlstetter et al., 1995; Triant, 2001; Lubienski, 2004). While they are given autonomy that most traditional public schools do not experience, charter schools are still held accountable to state and federal student academic achievement.[8]

Some charter schools have seen significant improvements in student academic achievement suggesting that their innovative approaches could be beneficial for similar students (Raymond, 2009). However, theory suggests the lack of autonomy system-wide might discourage or prevent traditional schools from adopting charter school-developed programs and approaches. Educators and practitioners within traditional public schools often recognize that they must work within the parameters of the public school system, which includes abiding by district and state statutes and policies. Being in such a high stakes environment, they cannot wait for autonomy before trying to improve outcomes for students (Adamowski et al., 2007) and thus cannot implement charter-school developed programs even if they would be beneficial for their students. This trend suggests that there might also be challenges with scaling up innovation school-developed programs if the innovation schools have autonomy levels that differ from other traditional public schools.

Innovation Schools and Central Offices

[8] http://www.publiccharters.org/About-Charter-Schools/What-are-Charter-Schools003F.aspx

Tyack and Cuban (1997) say that the national and state level reforms, or the top-down approach, are often unable to achieve the results they set out to perform because "excellence cannot be coerced" (cited from Timar & Kirp). For example, take a school that is struggling to meet federal standards and they receive several mandates to improve in x, y, and z areas. Their students, however, need help in l, m, and n areas. The federal mandates end up being ineffective for the students and the school continues to struggle to improve. On the other hand, Tyack and Cuban suggest that school-level decisions are more effective because school leaders and teachers can address particular student needs while taking ownership of the process and implement innovations with full fidelity. Tyack and Cuban's position strongly supports the idea of innovation schools and school autonomy because these two approaches allow schools to make decisions about what programs are best for their students. In making such decisions, school staff take direct ownership and responsibility for student outcomes and are likely to implement programs most appropriate for their students.

As mentioned earlier, however, school districts can provide essential supports that schools may not be able to develop on their own (Rorrer et al., 2008). Goodlad (1994) explains that the school is "an ecosystem within a district ecosystem, and renewal occurs through networked interaction in which schools and districts work cooperatively towards common goals" (Hargreaves & Fink, 2005).[9] In other words, schools are part of districts and they must cooperate with each other. If you apply this to Tyack and Cuban (1997), then school improvements can potentially be strengthened through district supports. To further extrapolate on this idea, school improvements, including innovation school strategies, could also be potentially strengthened through state and federal supports if the policies align. The next section further extrapolates on the school-district ecosystem and innovation policies to understand the circumstances that might lead to successful innovation schools.

Conceptual Framework

What do we know about the conditions that lead schools to innovate and improve their performance? How can districts support innovation schools? What kinds of policies at the state and district level are conducive to building successful innovation schools?

Plenty of evidence suggests that schools can indeed improve (David & Peterson, 1984; Huberman & Miles, 1984; Dembo & Gibson, 1985; Thanassoulis & Dunstan, 1994; Dunn & DeBello, 1999; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Bloom & Unterman; 2012). They can go from low

[9] As cited in Shannon & Bylsma (2007)

achieving to mediocre, mediocre to good, and good to excellent (Mourshed et al., 2010). Sometimes schools improve in this sequential manner, and at other times they improve with dramatic results that place them along different areas of this spectrum. Many cases of school improvement observe some level of innovation that educators implement to address student needs. It would seem that innovation through adapting multiple school policies and practices to address student needs is a required element for school improvement. This is true because:

- Students' needs differ from one another; the same approach won't necessarily be successful for all students
- Communities grow and change and schools must respond to how the community changes affect the school environment
- Teachers vary in their professional development needs

In each of these cases, schools must be prepared to adapt. Yet, while educators and policymakers might agree that schools need to address their student needs through innovative approaches, we know less about the conditions under which innovations contribute to long lasting improvements. One condition that might contribute to innovations being more successful is school autonomy. David (1989) argues that school autonomy can lead to greater improvements based on the following principles:

1. The school is the primary decision-making unit; and, its corollary, decisions should be made at the lowest possible level, and
2. Change requires ownership that comes from the opportunity to participate in defining change and the flexibility to adapt it to individual circumstances; the corollary is that change does not result from externally imposed procedures. (pg 46)

Honig (2009) also identifies ownership of change as an important factor for schools implementing innovations. Honig suggests that implementing innovations in schools can be more successful if school leaders, teachers, and staff are all in involved in developing the innovation plan(s). In participating in the development of the plan(s), as David (1989) suggests, school employees will feel an increased ownership during the implementation process and are likely to feel directly responsible for student outcomes.

Another factor that appears to matter is broader institutional support. Based on Tyack and Cuban's (1997) emphasis on the importance of schools making their own decisions combined with Goodlad's (1994) view that schools operate within a larger ecosystem, this report assumes that schools need some level of support to effectively implement innovations. Rorrer et al. (2008) suggests that districts can be "institutional actors" in supporting these school reforms. Institutional actors influence institutions from within, "particularly by

influencing the development and implementation of solutions to identified problems" (Cahn, `995, p. 201). Rorrer et al. (2008) identified the problem in education as student achievement and the solution is improving student achievement. Institutional actors, districts in this case, have the ability to mobilize necessary resources to support and increase the effectiveness of innovations in schools.

Rorrer et al. (2008) outline four roles districts can play in supporting innovation school reforms to address student achievement: 1) providing instructional leadership, 2) reorienting the organization, 3) establishing policy coherence, and 4) maintaining an equity focus. These roles are somewhat more indicative of district transformation (Honig et al., 2010), or districts changing to meet school needs. District transformation provides a compelling case for districts implementing change to see system-wide improvement, but how would it contribute to supporting innovation in schools?

One role districts can support innovation schools is through establishing policy coherence. Innovation schools are likely to implement changes that may conflict with existing policies. Establishing policy coherence appears to be an important factor for improving the chances of successful innovations. Glazer (2009) found that without policy coherence, schools using innovations to improve student outcomes were not successful because the innovations conflicted with existing policies. Policy coherence might prove to be an even more challenging endeavor given that policies in education change quickly (Henry et al., 2013). School leaders and teachers often feel like new policies are continuously "thrown at them" and keeping up with all of the changes can be challenging (Henry et al., 2013).

Another role district transformation can play in supporting innovation schools is through changing or adapting their operations to meet school needs. Dillon (2011) found that districts approach school autonomy in one of two ways: as a reward for high performing schools or as a strategy for improvement for low-performing schools. Dillon suggests when autonomy is treated as an award system, district-wide changes may not be necessary. In other words, these schools may not need considerable support from the district allowing the district to continue with its standard operations. When autonomy is treated as an improvement strategy, on the other hand, districts must provide ample support to the schools. Improvement strategies are typically used for schools that are failing and these schools often lack the internal capacity to successfully implement more changes which autonomy would bring. Thus districts would need to adapt their current operations to ensure they can provide the necessary support to schools. For innovation schools, this might mean that districts will need to adapt their support services based on the initial condition of the innovation school. If the school is already highly successful, then the districts can be more hands-off, but if the school is struggling, then the district will need to adapt their services to provide ample support.

There appear to be three distinct challenges surrounding innovation in schools: 1) schools operate within a larger ecosystem and must function together with districts and other schools, 2) policies at the state, district, and school level continue to emerge that encourage and yet also hinder innovation in schools, and 3) the longevity of innovation impacts are threatened by the continuously changing educational landscape.

The first challenge indicates that innovation schools may struggle to implement changes successfully depending on the current structure of the district it resides in. If innovation schools want to implement changes successfully, it is likely they will need some support from districts. However, districts cannot expend all of their energy and resources to supporting specific innovations because they must also support other schools. With innovation schools, districts face a differentiated school base that they may not have the capacity to support. Given this predicament, it would seem that districts would need to undergo some level of change, or transformation, in order to adequately support innovation schools as well other traditional public schools.

The second challenge indicates that policies may be both beneficial and detrimental to innovation school successes. For example, Washington passed two bills that encourage the development of innovation schools; however, it is likely that other existing policies, such as accountability or curriculum requirements, hinder the schools from implementing innovations with full fidelity. Glazer (2009) found that these policy conflicts often contribute to lackluster results for innovations. To overcome this challenge, it might benefit schools and districts to work together when developing innovation plans to ensure there is a strong policy coherence.

The third challenge addresses the continuously changing educational landscape and how these changes can threaten the long-term impacts of innovation schools. Educators are well aware of the ongoing changes within schools, districts, ands state level organizations. School principals and superintendents change relatively frequently, which can lead to instability for school improvement plans. For example, a school might develop a three-year innovation plan that the district leaders can currently support. The district has situated itself to provide resources for the school and the school implements the changes knowing they will be supported along the way. However, the district gets a new superintendent the following year and he or she decides to reorganize district services based on his or her strategy for improvement. These changes result in the elimination of the support system for the innovation school and the school struggles to continue implementing the innovation plan with full fidelity. These types of changes are not uncommon and threaten the chances for long-term impacts. To overcome this challenge, it would be prudent for districts and schools to develop long-term succession plans that can help schools and districts adjust during times of transition.

How are schools and districts navigating these challenges in practice? Are districts able to support schools and do they do so through undergoing transformative changes? Are schools and districts working together when developing innovation plans to enhance policy coherence? What does the research literature on these schools tell us about the effectiveness and longevity of school innovations that are initiated at the school level? How is the effectiveness and longevity increased when they are initiated and supported by a school district? To address these issues, this report will focus on two primary research questions:

1) Under what circumstances can schools and districts successfully implement innovation schools that lead to improved outcomes for students?

2) What strategies can districts and schools use to support sustainable school improvements?

Methods

To address these questions, I conducted a comprehensive literature review of research on innovation school initiatives. Adapting the methodological approach used by Honig and Rainey's (2011), I scanned research on innovation reforms that addressed three issues facing innovation in schools: 1) schools are part of an ecosystem and must function together with the district and other schools; 2) policies on all levels can encourage and hinder innovation in schools; and 3) continuously changing educational landscapes threaten the longevity of innovation school impacts. Using my earlier definition of innovation schools, I focused my review on literature that examined schools that are using multiple innovations to address student needs while engaging school staff, families, and the local community.

Given the relative newness of formal innovation reforms, only a limited number of studies have appeared in peer-reviewed journals. For that reason, I expanded my review to include district and state reports. I relied on ERIC and JSTOR databases to identify peer-reviewed articles and governmental (school district and state education department) websites to find policy specifics for existing innovation schools. In addition to consulting with colleagues working in district level positions with an intimate knowledge of innovation school initiatives, I conducted a web search – primarily governmental websites – using the following key terms: *innovation schools, school innovation department, autonomous schools,* and *pilot schools* to identify existing innovation schools.

I used the following key-terms to search the databases, school district and state websites, and internet search engines such as Google Scholar: *school innovation, school*

improvement plan, school-based decision making, district-level change, district innovation, and innovation policies. This initial search yielded over 1,000 documents on topics such as reports for schools, studies on improving teacher quality, school systems outside of the United States, and charter school reports and studies. I sorted documents based on the relevancy to the three issues stated before and omitted all other specifically related documents. Given that Washington does not yet currently have operating charter schools in the state and my focus on innovation schools is within the traditional K-12 public school structure, I excluded the charter literature from my review. Additionally, I omitted international comparative studies due to differences in authority structures and cultural relevance.

To determine the quality of these reports and their reputability, I considered both the reliability of the source it was published in and the rigor of its methods. For example, I included a report released by the Colorado State Department of Education on the status of their innovation schools because the State hired well-respected researchers in the field to objectively analyze the innovation school performances. On the other hand, I omitted reports or articles that were purely subjective and could not be corroborated with other documents. I also considered the number of times an article was cited in other documents using Google Scholar's cite tool as well as the type of documents they were cited in. I did not apply this approach to documents less than two years old.

This sorting process resulted in thirteen peer-reviewed journal articles, four policy briefs, and eleven reports. Peer-reviewed journal articles often include rigorous methodologies that can glean empirical evidence for a particular topic. In the case of innovation schools, peer-reviewed journal articles give insight into school practices based on rigorous methods. Policy briefs allow researchers to analyze how well policies align with actual school practices. Policy briefs are also important to assess because they provide insight into the educational and political landscapes that influence decision making at all levels. Reports are often produced by organizations with an interest in certain policies or initiative outcomes. For example, the Fordham Institute produces reports on a broad range of topics that affect student academic outcomes, such as standards-based curriculum, equity in schools, and school finance. These reports are valuable for researchers because they often provide a different perspective from policy briefs and peer reviewed journal articles that reflect public opinion and interests. While assessing reports, it is important to understand the organization's goals and missions for their research to identify potential bias towards certain results. When possible I considered my sources together triangulating common themes and findings when possible.

I then carefully read all twenty-eight documents in the final group and interpreted them for theoretical perspective. The value of this report lies in its theoretical foundation for Washington's Innovation School legislation to understand the following: 1) the degree to which

districts are undergoing changes to support innovation schools, 2) the degree to which schools and districts are collaborating to enhance policy coherence, and 3) the degree to which schools and districts are developing succession plans to increase the chance of long-term impacts. In researching these areas, this report aims to provide a deeper understanding of the circumstances that lead to successful innovation schools and strategies that districts and schools can use to support sustainable school improvements.

This report is not capable of making empirically based claims on innovation schools and school improvement plans. Despite this major limitation, I still made steps to ensure that the theoretical findings I present are based on high quality reports that can be triangulated with other documents.

Findings

School innovation emerges through three routes: 1) at the grassroots level, 2) from an explicit innovation initiative, or 3) as a result of autonomy initiatives. Grassroot-level innovations often emerge without any formal prompting from state or district level administrators.[10] Innovation initiatives and autonomy initiatives, on the other hand, are formal mechanisms that encourage schools to develop innovative programs to meet student needs. The distinction between innovation initiatives and autonomy initiatives lie in the end goal; innovation initiatives do not stress autonomy as a key ingredient for school improvement, while autonomy initiatives do. For example, an innovation initiative might encourage a school to develop an improvement plan that incorporates innovative programs or approaches that operate within the existing state or district statutes. These initiatives often include language that allow schools to apply for waivers from statutes, but there is no guarantee that the waivers will be granted. Autonomy initiatives, on the other hand, support schools in gaining more autonomy in areas such as budgeting, personnel, and school hours. Schools submit plans with the intention of receiving discrete autonomies. While school autonomy is not synonymous with innovation school, the processes in which they engage in developing school improvement plans are similar. Both initiatives focus heavily on improving teacher quality and student learning. In addition, learning from older initiatives, these approaches often include a strong emphasis on the districts acting as supports for schools during implementation.

[10] Due to informal nature of grassroot-level innovation, it is difficult to measure the effectiveness of these innovations and literature on these innovations is extremely limited. Therefore, these innovations are not discussed in this report.

Together, the literature articulates both the benefits and challenges associated with innovation schools. Benefits include: school environments improve for both staff and students; teachers and school leaders required to carefully assess the most effective strategies for improving student learning; and student needs are ultimately put at the center of the conversation. Challenges include: innovation schools struggle with implementation; districts struggle with supporting differentiated schools within one system; and accountability demands in high-stakes environments hinder long-lasting changes. Despite these challenges, innovation schools could be a promising option for improving student outcomes.

To review the above topics in more detail, the findings from the reviewed literature will be divided into two sections. Section 1 will discuss innovation at the school level and elaborate on how schools initiate and engage in the innovation process, findings on innovation school performance, challenges innovation schools face, and common elements of successful innovation schools at the school level. Section 2 will discuss innovation at the district level and elaborate on district-level supports for innovation and strategies districts use to implement innovation at the district level. Following these sections will be a discussion on innovation schools within the broader context and implications for Washington innovation schools.

Section 1: Innovation at the school level

Using policy briefs and state reports about innovation reforms in Boston, Oakland, Colorado and New York, as the research basis, this section will elaborate on how schools engage in the innovation process, innovation school performance, common challenges innovation schools face, and common elements of successful innovation schools. Limited research exists on the long-term effectiveness of innovation schools; however, scholars have examined the innovation process, the conditions under which schools innovate, the challenges they face, and the common themes among successful innovators. Understanding the process is important because it provides valuable insight on how to strengthen existing policies to better support innovation schools.

Beginning the Innovation Process

Research suggests that once a school district has formally announced its willingness to allow innovation, innovation schools typically emerge through one of two avenues: 1) because of internal demand or pressures at the school or 2) in response to central office mandates.

Given the strict regulations governing most school operations, schools that, on their own, decide to innovate often must seek a formal waiver of district policy. In all of the districts that I studied, this took the form of an innovation plan. In its plan, each school clearly identifies

how its program(s) will improve instruction and student outcomes. In these contexts, schools have proposed a range of changes from curriculum redesign and scheduling changes to restructured budget allocations.

When the central office initiates the process for a school(s) to become an innovation school, it often requires a low-performing or failing school that the district has identified as a "needs improvement" school. The district mandates the school to adopt an innovation plan to help improve student performance. Honig (2009) found that schools mandated to innovate school typically do not fare well because they lack the capacity to implement the reforms. For example, when Chicago implemented its new school autonomy initiatives, Chicago Public Schools selected schools based on their need to improve rather than their readiness to implement. The Chicago schools did not show improvement after implementing these reforms (Honig, 2009). We cannot definitely say these schools failed because they were mandated to implement autonomous reforms, but theory strongly supports the notion that schools that initiate the innovation process are more likely to see positive results. This aligns with David's (1989) and Honig's (2009) notion on the importance of ownership when implementing a school improvement plan. Unless the school leader(s) and staff support and contribute to the plan, then those implementing it on the ground level are unlikely to be as motivated as those who actively engage in the plan development. Theory would also suggest that those who develop the innovation plan should have an intimate knowledge of the students to address their specific needs; if the district mandated an innovation plan without having this intimate knowledge, then that could also be a contributing factor for the lack of success in Chicago.

Colorado is one example of a state that understands the importance of ownership and internal capacity for innovation schools. In 2008, Colorado passed the Innovation School Act. Colorado wanted to encourage innovation schools to address the discrepancies in academic performance between groups of students and allow schools to develop appropriate plans for student success (Price et al., 2011). As Washington has done, Colorado required schools to submit robust innovation plans in order to be designated as an innovation school. The Colorado Department of Education requires that these plans show support from a majority of the school staff and from the community as evidence that the comprehensive plan "addresses many stakeholder's concerns." Requiring a majority staff approval is corroborated by Smylie's et al. (1996) finding that indicates the inclusion of teachers in the decision-making about plans that affect school environment and/or curricula is related to instructional improvements and student academic outcomes.

In some cases, schools submitted innovation plans that highlighted a collaboration plan with outside organizations to assist in the school reform. Schools can benefit from collaborating with outside organizations to help support capacity development during their transitional

phases (Honig, 2006; Honig & DeArmond, 2010). Glazer (2009), however, examined schools partnering with community organizations to implement innovations and he found that many of these innovations failed to get promising results because their designs were not congruent with the larger environment, in this case district and state policies. The innovation policies directly conflicted with other policies.

Glazer's (2009) findings do not necessarily mean that schools should not partner with outside organizations to help implement innovation plans. On the contrary, Oakland (CA) and New York Public Schools saw improvements after collaborating with community organizations. New York partnered with New Vision for Public Schools (NVPS) to help identify capacity strengths and deficiencies (Honig & Rainey, 2011). NVPS then provided ongoing support in areas such as evaluation assistance, professional development, and community engagement. Honig and Rainey (2011) found that schools needed close supporting relationships with community members and "absent such community support, schools risked running into such implementation roadblocks as residents protesting" school changes they do not fully understand. These somewhat more successful examples indicate that partnering with outside organizations can be beneficial for the school and the district if the innovation plan accounts for broader policies.

Ownership, internal capacity, and policy coherence appear to be the most important factors to consider when implanting innovation plans. First, does the development of the innovation plan allow school staff to take on ownership during and after the process? Schools that initiated and developed their own innovation plans displayed higher levels of ownership and responsibility for improving student outcomes. Schools that districts mandated to implement innovation plans lacked the internal capacity and will resulting in a lack of ownership needed to successfully implement the plan. We can also infer from these findings that schools that developed their own innovation plans likely had the internal capacity to also implement the plans. Internal capacity to implement the innovations seems key to success. Partnering with outside organizations can help strengthen internal capacity, but schools should be diligent during their partnership to ensure that the plan(s) do not conflict with other existing policies. Innovation schools were not successful when policy coherence was absent. Subsequent sections will discuss how districts can help schools navigate these challenges through providing support.

Innovation School Performance

Given that the research has identified elements that lead to successful innovation schools (i.e. ownership and capacity); we need to ask what does success in innovation schools mean? Does success mean students are achieving better outcomes? Are teachers teaching more

effectively? There is limited research available on the long-term impacts of innovation schools, but we can look to the current research to understand how schools are faring in these somewhat early stages of implementation. The research indicates that many innovation schools appear to be on positive trajectories for graduation rates and school culture, but many are still struggling to see improvements for student academic outcomes on standardized tests.

Innovation schools in New York, Colorado, Boston, Oakland, and Chicago saw positive results in attendance and graduation rates (Honig & Rainey, 2011, Bloom & Unterman, 2012; Connors et al., 2012). Honig and Rainey (2011) conducted an extensive review on school autonomy initiatives in New York, Boston, Oakland, and Chicago from 2000 – 2010 and found that all sites saw positive results in attendance and graduation rates.[11] Bloom and Unterman (2012) also found promising results for innovation high schools in New York. Like many other districts, New York had many high schools with a long history of failure: between 2002 and 2008, it closed twenty-three large schools and reopened 216 new small high schools. These new small high schools, called small schools of choice, submitted innovation plans with a common theory of change in that "both small schools and small learning communities … promote stronger relationships among students, among adults, and between students and adults." (p. 3) Bloom and Unterman found that the small schools of choice significantly increased four-year graduation rates and that "every group benefited substantially from attending a small school of choice." (p. 5)

Positive cultural shifts were also present in most of the schools (Honig & Rainey, 2011; Connors et al., 2012). Such cultural shifts included: improved collaborative environments; quality professional development; school improvement plans that focused on teaching and learning improvement; and a strong sense of ownership, pride, and fulfillment (Honig & Rainey, 2011; Connors et al., 2012). For example, in Chicago, the authors found that teachers reported higher levels of responsibility for student achievement and students "were more likely than their counterparts in nonparticipating schools to report that their teachers held them to high academic achievement." (Honig & Rainey, 2011, p. 17) In Colorado, Connors et al. (2012) administered a school culture survey and all of the innovation schools saw higher scores on the school culture indicators compared to non-innovation schools. The authors' suggest that "greater empowerment of schools (through receiving innovation status) will lead to other positive changes in the school (including climate and behavior), which should result in improved outcomes for students."(p. 10) In other words, having a positive school culture can lead to a better learning environment for students resulting in better student outcomes.

[11] The sites they reviewed include: Boston Public Schools, Chicago Public Schools, Los Angeles Unified School District, New York Public Schools, and Oakland Unified School District (CA).

However, there is limited evidence of innovation schools seeing significant gains in student performance compared to traditional schools (Bloom & Unterman, 2012; Honig & Rainey, 2011, Connors et al., 2012). In fact, Oakland was the only district that saw statistically significant gains in student performance on standardized assessments (Honig & Rainey, 2011). In all other sites, innovation schools still performed lower or no better than non-innovation schools on standardized assessments. It might still be too early to determine why these schools have not seen improvements on students' standardized test scores (Honig & Rainey, 2011; Connors et al., 2012), but innovation schools have encountered several challenges during the implementation of their plans. The following paragraphs will discuss these challenges.

Challenges for Innovation Schools

Implementing change can be extremely challenging and innovation schools know this all too well. Schools must deal with a myriad of factors, any of which can complicate a school's innovation plan, including personnel changes in the school and the district, informal policy changes, and frustrating interactions with the district.

Honig and Rainey (2011) found that innovation schools often struggled to implement their innovation plans with full fidelity. All schools implemented their innovation plans, but to varying degrees. Deviating from initial plans is not always negative, especially if schools are adapting the plan(s) in light of unforeseen circumstances. However, there were many schools that were unable to fully implement their innovations due to a lack of internal capacity and external policies (Honig & Rainey, 2011, Connors et al., 2012). Organizational theory suggests that workers are often resistant to change despite their commitment to improve and that it takes time for innovative processes to fully emerge (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Collins, 2001). This theory is borne out in the research on innovative school.

Another challenge for innovation schools is the continuously changing landscape within schools (Connors et al., 2012). Colorado schools, including innovation schools, face high rates of turnover among teachers and principals. While new staff, who are not beholden to the school's former approach, can be beneficial to an innovation school, high turnover brought in teachers with less experience and steeper learning curves. Principal turnover was an even greater challenge. Some schools changed principals within just a year after receiving innovation status. These changes contributed to confusion and discontent among the staff and created difficulties for the district. For example, questions arose around who should choose the principals for innovation schools. The Colorado experience suggests that it is important for school leaders to develop succession plans for innovation schools so that schools can effectively navigate these challenges.

Autonomy, or the lack thereof as evident in informal policy changes, proved to be another challenge to implementation. To fully implement their innovations, school leaders often need greater autonomy from the school district. For example, 92% of Colorado's innovation schools requested waivers in primarily four areas: budget, schedule, workforce management, and level of control (Price et al., 2011). While innovation schools in Colorado were able to obtain waivers without incident, Honig and Rainey (2011) found that two of the four districts they observed often promised autonomies but failed to deliver them. For example, in Chicago, central office administrators reported that innovation schools had the same level of decision-making authority as non-innovation schools meaning that innovation schools were beholden to the same district policies as all other schools limiting their ability to use autonomies to implement any real changes. Honig and Rainey also reported that:

> "In Oakland, schools interested in new autonomies had to apply for specific waivers of district policy, even though they already been selected to participate in the new small autonomous schools initiative which promised autonomy. Such waiver processes were extremely cumbersome. For example, only waiver process demanded a school compose a 40-page waiver application that took considerable time and school resources to complete but that would be in effect only for one year …" (p. 21)

The Oakland example shows that a cumbersome waiver process can deter schools from pursuing autonomies, which can limit their ability to innovate and or implement planned innovations.

A final common challenge for innovation schools involved their interaction(s) with central office staff. Schools often reported they received helpful support from central office "innovation liaisons" or staff specifically assigned to innovation schools, but that other central offices, such as human resources, were not sufficiently trained to deal with these schools and thus treated them on the same level as non-innovation schools resulting in principals having to expend much more energy to rectify problems (Honig & Rainey, 2011). In other instances, central office administrators designated a single office to oversee innovation schools and these staff "typically encountered systemic barriers to putting policies and practice into place that fostered the new autonomies and they lacked the authority and perhaps, in some cases, the knowledge and other capacity to overcome those barriers." (p. 22) These challenges suggest that 1) districts must differentiate services for schools based on their needs, and 2) district staff supporting innovation schools must have the political power to ensure those needs are met.

It is not surprising that innovation schools face several challenges given that they are part of a broader complex system. They must navigate the continuously changing educational

landscape, informal policy changes, and their relationships with district and state administrators. Despite these numerous challenges, many innovation schools have seen some level of success suggesting that they are on a positive trajectory for more successes (Honigh & Rainey, 2011). The following paragraphs will highlight some of the common elements in successful innovation schools.

Common Elements in Successful Innovation Schools

The limited research suggests that innovation schools are more likely to be successful if they have the following:

- School-initiated innovation plan that identifies specific strategies for improved instruction and student learning[12]
- Support from community members and/or community based organizations[13]
- Capacity to fully implement the innovation plan
- Support from central office administrators
- Succession plan(s) in case of principal turnover[14]

These common elements are not easy to achieve. While many schools have seen successes with the innovation initiatives, we cannot yet definitively say that is due solely to the innovation status a school receives. Darling-Hammond (2010) argues that, "the United States … has spent millions creating innovative schools that, although promising, remain at the margins of a system that has not been redesigned to support a 21st-centure schooling experience" (Pg. 9). Similarly, Honig et. Al (2011) argues that systemic barriers present considerable challenges for districts to follow through on its promises of "new freedoms" for innovation schools. Despite promising results in some regions, districts and schools continue to struggle with implementing sustainable changes that result in improved performance for both teachers and students.

In addition, all of the innovation schools in the research demonstrate that they are not operating in isolation. They are still held accountable to state and district regulations and must interact with the central office on a regular basis. Because schools receive public funds, it is reasonable for the state and district to hold innovation schools accountable. Furthermore, state and district accountability combined with district relationships can potentially benefit

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[12] Ideally, teachers would be involved with the decision making process for the innovation plan to enhance staff buy-in.
[13] In the case of community-based organizations, schools should clearly identify how the collaboration plan rectifies any existing district policies to ensure a coherent design.
[14] This was evident only through negative examples in which schools did not have succession plans resulting in confusion and distress among staff.

innovation schools if there is an adequate support base. Glazer (2009) argues that a school's success hinges on how coherent the school's plan is within the broader system "because even the most carefully coordinated design is unlikely to enhance the instructional coherence if it lands in a school awash with other programs." (p. 209) The next section will elaborate on how the interaction between innovation schools and central offices plays a critical role in the success of the innovation school.

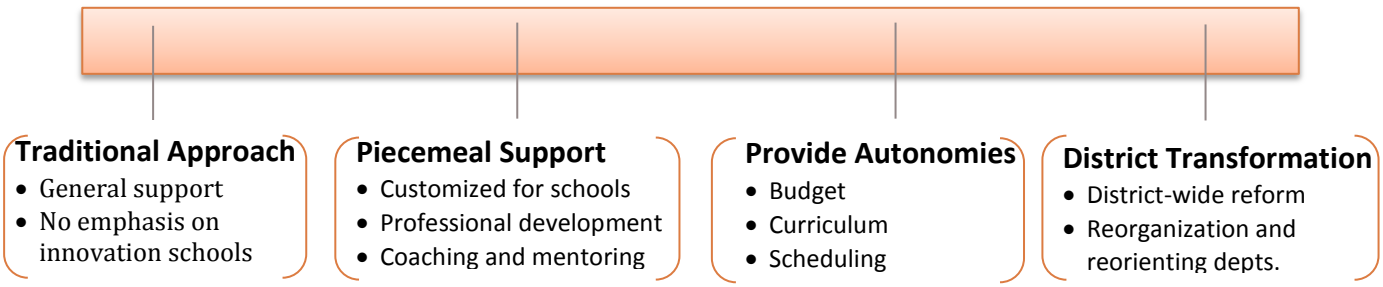
Section 2: Innovation at the district level

One body of scholars has argued that districts do not play a critical role in school improvement efforts. As quoted in Rorrer et al. (2008), for example, Chester Finn said, "The school is the vital delivery system, the state is the policy setter (and chief paymaster), and nothing in between is very important." (p. 309) According to this premise, central offices and districts are only middle managers responsible for administrative processes that do not impact school performance.

More recent research, however, has found that district leadership matters and can influence student performance (Chingos et al., 2013; Waters and Marzano, 2007). While some of this research is not specific to innovation schools, it is applicable because it shows that district leadership can potentially support or hinder innovation schools and their students' performance. In the last decade, a significant amount of research has focused on the district's role in supporting school-wide reform initiatives. Overall, this literature suggests that districts can play a critical role in helping improve school-wide reforms because they can mobilize limited resources and give legitimacy to reform efforts, but districts that want to engage in this work will require a significant amount of innovation and organizational restructuring to adequately support such reforms (Dillon, 2011; Glazer, 2009; Honig, 2006; Honig et al., 2010; Honig & Rainey, 2011; Honig, 2012; Rorrer et al., 2008).

Districts appear to support innovation along a spectrum from providing piecemeal supports and autonomies to complete transformation:

Spectrum of District Support for Innovation



In the paragraphs that follow, I report on the range of strategies along this spectrum that districts use to support schools and what kind of challenges districts face in doing so.

Districts Supporting Innovation Schools and Autonomy

On one side of the innovation spectrum are districts that support school autonomy and innovation. At least six large urban districts have implemented initiatives that support the formation of more autonomous public schools based on the premise that schools can improve when they have greater decision-making authority (Honig & Rainey, 2011; Honig, 2012).

Some districts – notably Oakland, New York City, Denver, Atlanta, and Boston – have chosen to support autonomous or innovation-like schools through formal institutional supports (Honig et. al., 2011; Bulkley et al, 2010; Honig 2012). For example, New York City, Oakland, and Atlanta, in an effort to strengthen school capacity, developed teams to work with principals one-on-one. These teams customized the kind of supports they provided based on the principals' needs. Traditionally, districts are directive-based, meaning that top administrators develop general strategies to support schools. The teams in New York, Oakland, and Atlanta deviated from this traditional directive-based operation style to engage in a more service-based operation style, meaning that they focus on providing services the school leader needs rather than relying on general strategies. For example, in an effort to strengthen school leadership and staff capacity for instructional improvement, Oakland Unified Schools District created a series of targeted professional development sessions, called the Incubator. The Incubator helped school leaders and staff identify effective strategies to implement school-wide innovations through focusing on building internal capacity. Honig and Rainey (2011) found that, "school principals and office administrators reported that the Incubator provided a major support for school design teams and many school respondents associated their performance gains with their participation in the Incubator." (p. 17) This indicates that districts can help school leaders implement school innovations through providing them customized supports.

Some districts augmented their institutional and piecemeal supports to help schools adapt to new autonomies. For example, in Boston, the district created a "Fiscal Autonomy Committee" that collaborated with participating schools to increase budget flexibility (Honig & Rainey, 2011). New York City also engaged in similar activities allowing schools more financial flexibility and the means to better understand how to use that flexibility.

Honig (2006) also found that some districts used collaborative partnerships with community based organization to supplement or provide capacity building supports for

innovation schools. Responding to schools wanting to try new approaches, districts often delegated or hired "boundary spanners," or individuals charged with overseeing these relationships, to support site-based collaborations between schools and organizations. As Honig noted, "Responding to new approaches can be challenging for central office staff because there is no precedent … But often, central offices still want to play a significant role." (p. 365) When adapting to new changes, it can be helpful to receive input from an outsider. For example, Oakland Unified School District hired non-traditional educators, or individuals who were not previously with the district, to spearhead the boundary spanning work. District leaders believed these individuals could provide a "fresh perspective" and engage in this dramatically different work with more ease than other district administrators who were otherwise entrenched in their work. These new boundary spanners were initially able to implement successful strategies to partner with these organizations while taking advantage of their "non-district status." However, these relationships became strained over time due to the boundary spanner's lack of knowledge or political leverage to influence district-level decision-making. These findings suggest that boundary spanners can play an important role for supporting school community relationships, but that they may be more effective if they are coupled with high-level district administrators.

Colorado also has districts actively supporting their innovation schools. Price et al. (2011) found that principals of new innovation schools struggled to get basic services when the initiative was first implemented. In an effort to support their innovation schools, Denver Public Schools created the Office of School Reform and Innovation (OSRI). Before the OSRI was created, principals faced a number of challenges with offices such as human resources, utilities, and the budget office. These departments did not know how to deal with innovation schools and thus treated them the same as the other schools. OSRI aimed to resolve these issues by acting as liaisons for innovation school principals to provide support in resolving these issues. Price et al. found that "OSRI was cited by principals as a key force in helping the district better align systems of support of Innovation Schools." (p. 32) Denver's OSRI, however, faces challenges with stability as they have a relatively high turnover rate which some principals feel "impedes the unit's effectiveness."

In almost all of the schools, principals viewed the district support(s) for innovation schools to be highly valuable suggesting that district support(s) are beneficial in helping schools implement and sustain their innovation plans. Common supports principals appreciated include: development of strategies to build internal capacity, managing interdepartmental district relations (i.e. human resources and utilities), and assistance with adapting to new autonomies. The following paragraphs will examine how districts engage in transformative reforms to provide more substantial support for schools.

Districts Implementing Innovations

On the other side of the spectrum are districts encouraging district-wide innovations within the central office to transform how they support school improvements. As noted earlier, one of the major challenges innovation schools face are their interactions with district staff who are unfamiliar with the innovation school policies. Staff who are unaware of innovation schools often become barriers for those schools, especially if the school is trying to implement innovation(s) that deviates from standard district protocol.

To see how districts might be overcoming their internal challenge to support schools, Honig et al. (2010) examined three districts – Atlanta Public Schools, New York City's Empowerment Schools Organization, and Oakland Unified School District - undergoing what they call central office transformation. Central office transformation requires a district to completely reform its organizational structure and culture through focusing "centrally and meaningfully on teaching and learning improvement, engaging the entire central office in reform, calling on central office administrators to fundamentally remake their work practices and their relationships with schools to support teaching and learning improvements for all schools…." (p. 1) Honig et al. highlighted five dimensions for central office transformation:

1) Learning-focused partnerships with school principals to deepen principals' instructional leadership practice
2) Assistance to the central office-principal partnerships
3) Reorganizing and re-culturing of each central office unit to support the central office-principal partnerships and teaching and learning improvement
4) Stewardship of the overall central office transformation process
5) Use of evidence throughout the central office to support continual improvement of work practices and relationships with schools

Both Honig et al. (2010) and Rorrer et al. (2008) emphasize the need for central office administrators to be instructional supporters for principals. They call these instructional supports instructional leadership directors (ILD). Honig (2012) closely analyzed these instructional leadership directors and found strong support that ILD practices can improve principals' instructional leadership. Successful ILDs in all of the districts had teams of principals they were tasked to support and routinely engaged in the following activities:

- Differentiating supports based on principal needs
- Modeled behavior for principals to better understand what theory looks like in practice
- Brokering and bridging resources for principals

As noted earlier, these kinds of supports are beneficial to innovation school leaders due to their need for customized support. These supports also appeared to be beneficial for non-innovation school leaders as well. This suggests districts can differentiate their services based on school needs through undergoing similar district transformation.

Another important feature of district innovation and transformation revolved around reorganizing and "re-culturing" all central office departments (Honig et al., 2010; Rorrer et al., 2008, Corcoran et al., 2001). Heifetz et al.'s (2009) work on organization transformation supports this theory of action and emphasize the importance of reorienting all offices to focus on a common goal and how their work contributes to that goal. For example, Honig et al. (2010) observed Atlanta Public Schools Superintendent Beverly Hall use this strategy to get all central office staff to focus on improving teacher instruction and student learning:

> "Confirming the value of such communications, we found remarkable consistency between how Hall framed the importance of transformation in central office practice for supporting teaching and learning improvement, and the learning improvement that actually occurred in schools. This foundational rationale – that improvement in teaching and learning across the entire system was incumbent on the central office playing a critical support role – ran counter to the way business had been done in Atlanta, and required major changes in how people in the central office thought about their work … The essential message that supporting schools was the paramount duty of the central office was captured in a refrain we heard consistently from multiple central office leaders that their work involved "flipping the script"." (p. 96)

Given the difficulty with districts supporting differentiated schools in the past, "flipping the script" or changing the way district staff view their jobs and how they relate to student learning seems to be a critical element for districts to develop the capacity to differentiate their support for schools. Honig et al.'s (2010) findings also emphasize the need for districts to make "intentional efforts to build capacity of people throughout the district" and that district leaders must continuously evaluate the evidence and adapt their theory of change to respond to school and district needs. Without doing so, the district risks returning to old habits, such as providing generic services that do not address individual school needs, which could diminish the impact of the reform(s).

Challenges for Districts Implementing Innovations

Understandably, the districts engaged with central office transformation also encountered many challenges including:

- Staff resorting to former ways of thinking and working
- Lack of time to properly assess ongoing reforms
- Accountability demands from the state and elsewhere
- Limited resources to develop internal and external capacity

For example, Corcoran et al. (2001) found that district leaders often had to respond to high demands and push aggressively for reforms without substantiating them on evidence. As Corcoran et al. notes, "District policy makers could not wait for years to decide whether to aggressively push a reform. They were under pressure to act, and they often merely planned for replication." (p. 84) Research suggests that foregoing concentrated efforts to base practices on evidence for the sake of time can be detrimental for central office transformation (Honig et al., 2010; Honig, 2012; Rorrer et al., 2008).

Districts engaging in transformation or thinking about implementing a transformation reform to increase their capacity to support differentiated schools should be aware of these challenges and develop strategies to buffer them. [15] The research suggests that transforming central office practices is extremely challenging, but it is also promising for seeing long-lasting changes both at the school and district level. This is especially poignant given the research on districts supporting innovation schools reveals that alignment between central office departments, or the lack there of, is a common challenge. Undergoing district-wide transformation could be one method for districts to ensure staff are well aware of what their role is in supporting those policies and schools.

Discussion: Innovation schools and the broader context

This paper has identified challenges and successes associated with innovation schools at the school level and district level; it will now look at these elements together to understand how they interact within the broader context.

Both schools and districts faced several challenges in implementing innovations in schools (see Table 1 for common challenges). Innovation school challenges include: high personnel turnover, lack of internal capacity, lack of adequate support from central offices, central office staff unaware of innovation school policies, high accountability demands, and lack of policy coherence. Challenges for districts include: lack of internal capacity to support differentiated schools, clear communication between and within departments, and

[15] See Honig et al. (2010) for more details on buffering challenges for transformation reforms.

accountability demands. Some of the challenges districts face appear to be the cause for some of the school challenges. First, the communication challenges within districts led to staff unaware of innovation school policies; these staff treat innovation schools no different than non-innovation schools, which is a common challenge schools face. Second, the lack of internal capacity within districts to support differentiated schools results in innovation schools not receiving adequate support from the district during implementation. A common challenge both schools and districts face is high accountability demands. Schools implement innovation plans to improve student outcomes and these desired results do not often materialize immediately. Connors et al. (2012) and Honig & Rainey (2011) noted in their reports that it may be too early to see results as these changes take time, possibly years, to materialize in terms of student performance on standardized assessments. Schools and districts rarely have that much time to prove if their reforms are working. It is also important to note that some innovations may not succeed because the plan is ineffective. While high accountability demands may present a challenge, it is important for schools and districts to continuously assess how innovations are affecting student performance and adapt innovations as necessary.

Despite several challenges, schools and districts also saw some success when implementing innovations, including: improved graduation and attendance rates, improved school culture, and a stronger sense of ownership and responsibility among staff. Common elements of success for schools (see Table 1 for common elements of success): include: school initiated innovation plans, high levels of internal capacity, and targeted support from central office administrators including capacity building support. Common elements of success for districts include support from top administrators, clear communications between departments, differentiated support teams and staff, and support from community-based organizations.

Table 1. Challenges and successful elements for innovation schools

	Common Challenges	Common Elements for Success
School Level	• *Educational landscape instability* • *Lack of internal capacity* • *Lack of support from central offices* • *Unaware central office staff* • *Policy coherence* • *High accountability demands*	• *School initiated innovation plans* • *Community support* • *Internal capacity to implement plan* • *Support from central office administrators* • *Capacity building supports* • *Succession plans*
District Level	• *Supporting differentiated schools* • *Internal communications* • *Internal capacity to support schools* • *Accountability demands*	• *Support from top administrators* • *Clear communications between departments* • *Differentiated supports* • *Support from community (organizations0*

Through understanding the similar elements of success and the common challenges for schools and districts, we can infer that innovation schools may see long-term success if they have the following:

- Coherent innovation plan that accounts for other district and state policies
- Innovation plans that focus on instructional improvement and student learning
- Involvement of school and district staff and community members during innovation plan development and implementation
- Support from central offices for innovation schools while implementing reform(s)
- Central office capacity to support differentiated schools
- Capacity – both within schools and districts – to support school changes
- Clear communications between and within central office departments and school staff
- Continuous assessment of how plan is contributing to student achievement
- Engaging in evidence-based practices
- Long-term succession plans

These elements of success have several policy implications. First, capacity is a critical element for both schools and districts. If either lack the capacity to fully implement innovations, then it is likely the innovations will fail. Second, policy coherence is also a critical element for innovation schools. If the innovation policies conflict with district or state policies, then the schools will likely have difficulties implementing the innovation(s) with full fidelity. Schools and districts should work together when developing innovation plans and use formal mechanisms, such as waivers, to ensure schools will have the ability to implement their innovations. Third, communication is another critical element for both schools and districts. Districts supporting innovation schools must have staff that are aware of the innovation policies and understand what their role is in supporting them. Schools implementing innovations need to communicate with and include staff during the developments stages and ongoing assessments. Finally, districts and schools should be held accountable for their performance to ensure that students are receiving the best education possible. However, high accountability demands that only assess student performance may miss other important factors that reflect school performance. If innovation schools aren't seeing immediate improvements in student performance, it is important to understand why. Are they failing because they lack capacity? Are they failing because of district challenges? Have they seen improvements in other areas? Policymakers should consider these factors when determining what are appropriate expectations of innovation schools within a given timeframe.

Implications for Washington Innovation Schools

As Washington enters its third year since passing legislation that recognizes and encourages innovation schools, it has the advantage to learn from other states with innovation schools and assess the strength of its own innovation policies.

In Washington, the OSPI created a process to recognize and designate new innovation schools. This process requires schools to submit an innovation plan that clearly identifies evidence-based practices that will improve student learning. This requirement is a promising element because the findings suggest that innovation schools are more likely to see long-lasting changes if the school initiates the innovation. However, Honig et al.'s (2010) work on central office transformation lends itself to suggest that districts could potentially initiate reforms that result in long-lasting changes if they can adequately support schools. Capacity is critical and innovations are likely to succeed if those implementing them have adequate capacity. Innovations also seem to be more successful if school staff feel a sense of ownership, therefore, it would be prudent for districts to work together with schools if districts decide to initiate innovation plans. Forcing innovation on schools is not successful and does not lead to school or student improvement. . As Datnow and Stringfiel (2000) noted, "Efforts to implement diverse reforms are more likely to be effective when educators at various levels share goals and work in concert to co-construct highly reliable reforms," further strengthening the importance of schools and districts working together to develop effective innovation plans.

Another promising policy in Washington is OSPI's requirement for schools to demonstrate strong community partnerships and support from school staff in their application in order to be considered. Partnering with community organizations helped other innovation schools achieve initial success. It is important to note that schools were not as successful, even when they partnered with outside organizations, if the school's plan conflicted with existing policies. Therefore, it is vital for everyone involved in the innovation plan to be aware of policies and aim to align innovation plans with existing policies.

Unlike other states, Washington's innovation schools did not acquire many waivers indicating that schools may not yet need autonomy to implement their plans.[16] We should ask why these schools did not seek to obtain waivers. Is it because they do not feel they need certain autonomies at this point? This would follow some innovation schools in Colorado as they did not implement plans that required autonomy during their initial phase. However, most

[16] Out of the 22 innovation schools, only 2 acquired waivers.

schools obtained waivers and utilized their autonomies to implement school-wide changes in later phases. Did schools not obtain waivers because the waiver process is cumbersome and school leaders opt out of the process to pursue other options? Or did they not seek state waivers because it's district rather than state policy that is the bigger obstacle? If either of these are the case, then we should consider the degree to which schools are implementing their innovation plans and whether they are hindered by state and district policies.

Implementing innovation schools, however, requires more than just having plans that demonstrate evidence-based practices, strong community partnerships, and waivers. To implement successful innovation schools requires a considerable amount of capacity and foresight from both the schools and the districts. Common themes in successful innovation schools in other states include:

- Coherent innovation plan that accounts for other district and state policies
- Innovation plans that focus on instructional improvement and student learning
- Involvement of school staff and community members during innovation plan development and implementation
- Support from central offices for innovation schools while implementing reform(s)
- Capacity for districts to support differentiated schools
- Capacity – both within schools and districts – to support school changes
- Continuous assessment of how plan is contributing to student achievement
- Engaging in evidence-based practices
- Long-term succession plans

Due to the challenging nature of implementing successful innovation schools, it may not be an appropriate strategy for all schools. However, if the district(s) and the school(s) have the capacity and or the means to build capacity, then using the innovation school strategy should be strongly considered. Moving forward, innovation school evaluators should ask the following questions:

1. Do schools appear to have the appropriate capacity to fully implement their plans?
2. To what degree do schools feel like their districts support them?
3. To what degree are districts actively supporting innovation schools?
4. Are schools demonstrating evidence-based practices and continuous assessments?

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